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AUTHOR Nimnicht, Glen
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the meaning of environmental deprivation, specifically the effects of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences on education. Objectives are also given for a Head Start and Follow Through program. A child is environmentally deprived to the extent that he has not developed his intellectual ability and a positive self-image. Environmental deprivation is often caused by a limited quantity and poor quality of interaction between a child and adults, particularly his parents. The quality and the amount of interaction are reduced by conditions prevalent in poor homes: (1) parents' low educational achievement, (2) absence of the father in the home, (3) a large family, (4) a crowded home, (5) a high rate of physical and mental illness, and (6) a parental attitude of psychological defeat. All of these factors contribute to limited intellectual development and a negative self-concept. Because schools are oriented to the white middle class, they fail to respond to the life style, values, and culture of minority group children. Head Start and Follow Through should respond to minority groups and focus on developing sensory and perceptual acuity, concept formation and problem solving ability, and language competence. Home involvement is also needed. Programs should respond to the child's needs and involve the family in a meaningful way. (DR)

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ENVIRONMENTALLY DEPRIVED CHILDREN

By

Glen Nimnicht

Deprivation is often mistakenly associated with being black or Indian or Mexican-American. In fact, the term "deprived child" seems to be used almost as a synonym for Negro or other minority group children* But to do so demeans the groups involved, confuses the issues, and prevents a clear definition of the problems. This paper attempts to clarify the meaning of environmental deprivation--specifically the effects of racial, ethnic and cultural differences on education--and to develop a better statement of objectives for a Head Start and Follow Through program.

In Head Start and Follow Through, we are concerned with children from impoverished homes. Some of them are environmentally deprived, most of them are white, many are black or Mexican-American and others have different ethnic and racial backgrounds. We know that many of these children have been exposed to different kinds of development in sensory and perceptual acuity, language and the ability to form concepts and solve problems. But there is nothing basically wrong with these children! There probably is a normal distribution of potential intellectual ability among poor, non-white children. The possible exception would be poor, white children. This is because poor whites have not been subject to the prejudice that has kept other groups poor regardless of ability.

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* For a clear insight into the complexities of the black family in America and the dangers of over-generalizing, see Billingsley, Andrew; Black Families in White America.

Assuming, then, that we are dealing with normal children focuses our attention on the environment as the cause of deprivation. A child is environmentally deprived to the extent that he has not developed his intellectual ability and a positive self-image. This means, of course, that all children are probably environmentally deprived to some degree. But our focus is on poor children, and the question is, "Why are these children as a group more deprived than other children?"

THE FAMILY

Probably the most significant factor in the early intellectual development of a young child is the quantity and the quality of the interaction between him and adults. Not only does poor quality interaction retard intellectual development, it also fails to nurture a positive self-concept. And the causes and effects of poverty tend to reduce both the quantity and the quality of adult-child interaction.

The conclusion that the most significant factor in causing environmental deprivation is the quantity and quality of the interaction between an individual child and significant adults rests upon the following research findings:

(1) In the same family, twins usually have lower I.Q. test scores than single children.

(2) The only child or the oldest child achieves better in school.

(3) Brothers and sisters who are close together in age do not develop as rapidly as those whose difference in ages is greater.

(4) Children raised in institutions do not seem to develop as rapidly as children raised in families.

(5) Children who have been isolated appear to be retarded.

(6) The educational achievement of children is highly related to the educational achievement of their parents.

None of these findings have anything to do with poverty, race or ethnic group. The one common variable is the quality or the quantity of the adult-child interaction: Single children probably receive more individual adult attention than twins; the only child or the oldest child probably receives more attention; so do spaced children, children raised in families, and children raised in more social situations; and the quality of the interaction is better with educated parents. In each finding the child who probably has not received as much adult attention or as much quality attention appears to have some gap between his intellectual potential and its realization.

How do these findings relate to the environment of a poor home? Poor families usually have one or more of the following characteristics:

(1) The parents have low educational achievement.

(2) The father is not in the home.

(3) The family is larger than average.

(4) The homes are crowded.

(5) There is a high rate of physical and mental illness.

(6) The parents are psychologically defeated.

Some of these characteristics help explain why the family is poor. Others explain the effects of poverty. But all of them can contribute to environmental deprivation. My point is that the more such characteristics in a home, the more likely the quality and quantity of the individual interaction between a child and an adult will be limited and the child will be intellectually deprived.

For example, low parent educational achievement means several things: Because the parents have not had a lot of experience with education, they may not understand the educational process. They don't know how they can help their child be successful in the system, and they don't understand how they can change the system to make it more responsive to the child. Their language may not be the language of the school. Many have learned from their school experience not to have high expectations, so they don't expect their children to do well in school.

The absence of a man means the woman has to assume the responsibilities of both parents. It often means the mother is out of the home earning money. Regardless of how much she loves her children, she only has so much time and energy. If it is used cleaning someone else's house or worrying about obtaining food and clothing, not much is left for her own children. Many mothers do manage to work and have time for their children but a combination of circumstances does steal the time she can spend with her own children.

Because many poor families are larger than other families, the available time and energy is even further reduced. The more children,

the less time the adults have to spend with any one child. The child's chances for interacting with adults who explain, answer questions, interpret his environment and correct his misconceptions, are reduced.

Furthermore, large families with limited incomes usually have crowded living conditions. The child probably has plenty of sensory experiences available. He sees and hears more than most children, but most of what he sees and hears is not responsive nor relevant to him. So the child is likely to learn to tune out much of his environment rather than learning to see and hear more precisely.

And, of course, physical or mental illness in the home decrease the child's chances for responsive adult-child interactions.

Finally, there are many poor parents who are psychologically defeated. Perhaps they have reconciled themselves to living on welfare. The man may be resigned to depending on his wife for an income. What psychologically defeated people have in common is a loss of the sense of agency. They don't believe that what they think, say or do really makes any difference. Something like fate or luck controls, shapes and determines their lives in important matters. Such feelings of powerlessness or alienation are then transmitted to their children.

Of course, none of these characteristics of impoverished homes necessarily cause environmental deprivation. Each of us, from our own experience, can name exceptions. Even a combination may not produce deprivation but it is clear that each can reduce the quality or quantity of adult-child interaction. And as the number of these characteristics increase, the probability of the children growing up deprived increases.

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The same factors that limit intellectual development of children also limit development of a positive self-concept. If part of a positive self-concept is a feeling that you are important--worth paying attention to--a tired, worried mother is not likely to give you this feeling. Or if you are a boy in a fatherless home and the mother expresses her disenchantment with men, you are not likely to feel positive about being a boy. If part of a positive self-concept is the feeling that you can be successful, you are not likely to develop that feeling in a home where your parents see themselves as unsuccessful, are psychologically defeated and so have a low level of aspiration for you. Since a positive self-concept is related to school success, a negative self-concept relates to school failure.

THE SCHOOL

Schools are also part of the environment that contributes to deprivation. The schools do a good job for children from white middle-class homes (but not as good a job as many minority groups think).

If a child is not white and middle-class, the schools tend to teach him that he is inferior and can't learn. In other words, the school reinforces some of the worst aspects of his environment. Instead of the child developing his intellectual ability, he drops further and further behind his white, middle-class peers (at least when measured on their standards) scoring lower on I.Q. tests in the fifth grade than he did in the first (Deutsch).

I have been discussing environmentally deprived children from impoverished homes. The problems are basically those of poverty rather than ethnic background. If the poor child is also from a minority group, his problems are compounded. In a school system that is oriented towards

the life style and standards of the white middle-class regardless of who it serves, it is an obvious handicap to be black or speak Spanish. But the handicap is not the fault of the child's, it is the fault of the school. Schools simply do not respond to the child's life style, values and culture. And this fault affects all minority-group children, not just those who are environmentally deprived.

When we develop Head Start and Follow Through programs to help environmentally deprived children, we must compensate not only for the effects of poverty but we must also respond to the minorities whose children make up more than their fair share of such groups. Unless we make this fundamental change in the school system itself, these programs will be of little worth. Schools must become more responsive to the life styles, values and culture of all the people it serves.

We must stop trying to change children so they will be successful in schools designed for the majority. We must try to change schools so minority children can be successful.

For example, if the child is a Crow Indian living on a Montana reservation, he comes to school speaking only Crow. Shouldn't his instruction be in his language with English considered the second language? Shouldn't the curriculum start with what the child knows and build from there? Shouldn't the program be concerned with who that child is and who his people are? Shouldn't much of the content be about Crow Indians - their history, their values and their role in modern American life? And shouldn't the procedures used in the school also be consistent with the life style of the Crow people?

Responding to a Crow child may seem easier than responding to a black child living in West Oakland. But it shouldn't be. The black child also has a language; he also comes to school knowing many things; and the program needs to build on these and to be concerned with who he is and who his people are. Black values, black culture and black history are important to him.

This is nothing more than statements of obviously good educational practices. And we have been applying them to the education of the majority of the children. Their first readers have picture clues that help them learn written words; but many of the children I am concerned about first have to learn the spoken names of the pictures, and many more have to learn the spoken names in a foreign language. How can the educator be surprised when those children don't learn as well as the children the system was designed for?

However, we do need to avoid oversimplifying the problem. While the school needs to be more responsive to children, so does the home environment.

The problem is not going to be solved until the home environment is improved. This means that parents must know and understand what the teacher is trying to do and they must know how they can be more responsive to their child. The school (and the home) can be responsive without being demeaning by developing skills not dependent on culture:

Sensory and Perceptual Acuity

Since the senses provide the information for thought, their development is important to children from every culture.

Concept Formation and Problem Solving Ability

Children of all cultures need to understand concepts such as over and under, between, beside, in front of, longer, shorter, etc. and to see logical relationships and be able to solve problems.

Language

Every child also needs to be competent in a language. And much of this competence is being able to associate language with senses, perceptions, concepts, and problem-solving skills. But the language obviously need not be standard English.

Head Start and Follow Through Programs that focus on helping environmentally deprived children develop the above skills will be responsive and relevant to all children.

Although other environmental factors affect the child, the home and the school account for most of the significant influences. Head Start and Follow Through Programs that respond to the child's needs and involve the family in a meaningful way can make real progress in helping deprived children develop their potential ability.

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